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Record crowds

LOS ANGELES, California, June 25. World Cup crowds are on course for an all-time record for the tournament with an average of 66,744 spectators watching the first 17 matches, reports AFP.

The previous highest average was 60,772 for the 22 games at the 1950 tournament in Brazil.

Official figures from FIFA — correct to the end of Thursday's games — show 1,134,645 fans watched the first 17 of the 52 games in the USA.

Italy '90 holds the record total with 2.4 million spectators — average 46,182 — but that will be smashed with 3.6 million tickets having been sold this time.

The two highest attendances have been at the Pasadena Rose Bowl — the stadium which will host the final on July 17 — with a 93,194 crowd for the USA versus Colombia game and 91,856 for Cameroon against Sweden.

Only the Nigeria versus Bulgaria game in Dallas, which was watched by a 44,132 crowd, pulled in under 50,000 spectators.

OFFICIAL ATTENDANCES

- Germany v Bolivia (Chicago) 63,117
South Korea v Spain (Dallas) 56,247
USA v Switzerland (Detroit) 73,425
Italy v Republic of Ireland (New York) 74,826
Colombia v Romania (Los Angeles) 91,856
Belgium v Morocco (Orlando) 60,790
Norway v Mexico (Washington) 52,395
Cameroon v Sweden (Los Angeles) 83,959
Brazil v Russia (San Francisco) 81,061
Holland v Saudi Arabia (Washington) 52,535
Argentina v Greece (Boston) 53,486
Germany v Spain (Chicago) 63,113
Nigeria v Bulgaria (Dallas) 44,132
Romania v Switzerland (Detroit) 61,428
USA v Colombia (Los Angeles) 93,194
Italy v Norway (New York) 74,825
South Korea v Bolivia (Boston) 54,456
Total: 1,134,645. Average: 66,744.

Mistrusted mirth

MEXICO CITY, June 25. Mexican soccer fans clashed with police in central Mexico City on Friday as tens of thousands poured onto the streets to celebrate their country's 2-1 World Cup defeat of Ireland, reports Reuter.

Witnesses said that, despite a steady drizzle, about 20,000 fans decked out in the country's green, white and red colours brought the capital's main avenue to a standstill around the monument to the Angel of Independence.

Chants of "Mexico, Mexico" and "Visas" for Luis Garcia, scorer of both goals in Mexico's first round win in Orlando, mingled with the sound of firecrackers and music as fans congregated within minutes of the final whistle.

The mood changed when police arrived and were met by a hail of bottles, stones and other missiles.

There was no immediate word of any arrests or injuries.

"They almost overturned my car," said one frightened man who was driving past on his way back to work in the nearby financial markets area.

Mexico lost their opening match 1-0 to Norway but Friday's win left them top of Group E with one game to go.

Eire look beyond setback

DUBLIN, Ireland, June 25: Thudding back to earth as their heroes wilted in the Florida sun, Ireland's soccer fans remain optimistic about moving ahead in the World Cup, reports AP.

Ireland, who started with a 1-0 victory over Italy, lost 2-1 to Mexico on Friday.

"Not the end of the world," said a front-page headline in the Irish Times on Saturday.

"We're still in with a chance," said the Irish Independent.

Hosts ready for Romanians



PASADENA, June 25: World Cup hosts the United States, on the brink of the last 16 after twice upsetting the form book, are ready for a Romanian backlash in their final Group A match on Sunday, reports Reuter.

"We know exactly what we have to do," said US defender Marcelo Balbos. "Romania will be smarting after the way they folded (4-1) against Switzerland.

"They will be desperate to make up for that against US

and have not been beaten in their last seven games — the second-longest undefeated streak since the United States started playing international soccer in 1985.

While US coach Bora Milutinovich is expected to name an unchanged side, his opposite number's plans are shrouded in secrecy.

Coach Angel Iordanescu was always unhappy that Romania would be forced to change time zones by moving from the west coast to Detroit for the Swiss match.

He was still in a sour mood on Friday when he refused to discuss his team selection, tactics, or injury problems when reached by telephone at his hotel room.

"I have no news for you, I have no news for anyone," he said. "You will find out everything on Sunday. I have nothing to say now. I have not even decided on the team yet."

The only thing that is certain is that Ion Vladoiu, who was sent off just three minutes after coming on as a substitute against Switzerland, will miss the match. He received a three-match ban from FIFA on Thursday.

Raducliotu, who scored twice in their 3-1 win over Colombia, said the team blamed themselves for the subsequent loss to the Swiss. "Everyone knows we can do better, and we intend to do just that against the

With four points from their first two games, the Americans are as good as in the second round, but Romania are still in contention with three points and could win the group if they beat the US and Colombia defeat Switzerland.

With players of the calibre of Gheorghe Hagi, Florin Raducliotu and Ilie Dumitrescu, Romania would appear to be far too strong for an American squad with little international pedigree.

But with the US having drawn with the Swiss and beaten Colombia, and with 90,000 American supporters screaming their on at the Rose Bowl, the host nation could produce another major upset.

US captain Tony Meola was under no illusion of the task ahead of his team when he said on Friday: "Our victory over Colombia and Romania's loss to Switzerland on Wednesday does not mean we are automatically going to win this one, too."

"But I'm pleased we're going into the match with a draw followed by a win, rather than they way they are coming into it, with a win followed by a loss."

Group A has been the most surprising of the six so far, with Switzerland heading the stands with four points, ahead of the United States on goal difference.

"You could say we've surprised a few people about that," said US defender Alexi Lalas. "I don't think too many people thought we would be going into the game looking to top the group. To be honest, I am not sure we did either."

The Americans go into the match having won their last four games at the Rose Bowl

Americans," he said.

PROBABLE TEAMS United States: 1-Tony Meola, 5-Thomas Dooley, 17-Marcelo Balboa, 20-Paul Calligiuri, 21-Fernando Clavijo, 22-Alexi Lalas, 6-John Harkes, 9-Tab Ramos, 16-Mike Sorber, 8-Ernie Stewart, 11-Eric Wynalda.

Romania: 12-Bogdan Stelea; 2-Dan Petrescu, 3-Daniel Prodan, 4-Miodrag Belodedici, 6-Gheorghe Popescu, 14-Gheorghe Mihail, 5-Ionut Lupescu, 7-Dorinel Munteanu, 10-Gheorghe Hagi, 9-Florin Raducliotu, 11-Ilie Dumitrescu.

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Rowdy party!

HUNTINGTON PARK, Calif. June 25. A street party celebrating the World Cup soccer tournament turned rowdy leading to minor looting and the arrest of one man after a sheriff's deputy was struck by a car, authorities said Saturday, reports AP.

Eighty law officers were needed to quell the two-hour disturbance, which started about 11 pm Friday, said Los Angeles County Sheriff's spokesman Deputy Gabe Ramirez.

Deputies along with officers from six communities moved in when some in the crowd of approximately 5,000 began stopping traffic and blocking streets in this community about eight kilometres (5 miles) southeast of downtown Los Angeles, Ramirez said.

The windows of three to four businesses were smashed and some looting was reported. Some police officers reported being struck by rocks and bottles, Ramirez said.

After being asked to disperse, some in the crowd drove through the area in caravans and continued to block streets. The vehicles were stopped one at a time and the drivers were ordered out of the area.

One deputy was struck by a car at Crockett Boulevard and Nadequ Street. The deputy held on to the vehicle to avoid being thrown under its wheels, Ramirez said.

The deputy, who was not identified, was taken to a hospital with a badly bruised elbow and thigh. He was treated and released, Ramirez said.

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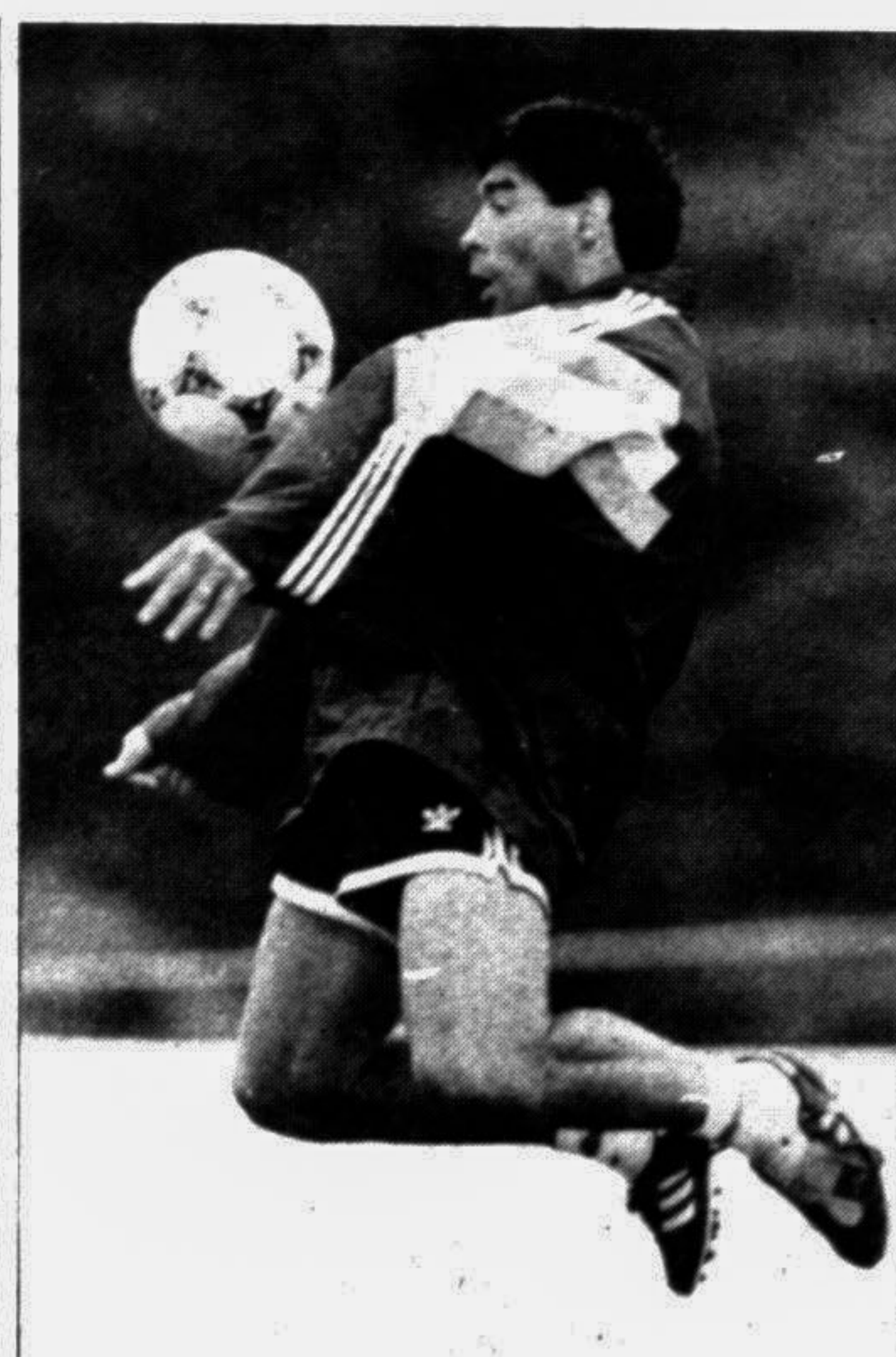
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Even the masters need to polish the basics all the time. Diego Maradona is about to chest-trap a ball during Argentina's training session at the Babson College ground on June 24 ahead of the Group D match against African champions Nigeria.

Boca want Maradona?

WELLESLEY, Massachusetts, June 25: Diego Maradona said on Friday he had heard that Boca Juniors, the club he helped to win the 1981 Argentine Championship, want him to play for them again, reports Reuter.

"I've just heard that Boca want me, that Algre wants me," Maradona said, naming the club's president Antonio Alegre.

"The biggest thing I have is my country, but after that there is that blue and yellow shirt I love so much," the Argentine added, referring to Boca's colours.

Maradona has often said he would like to end his career at Boca Juniors, but he said he preferred to handle his latest comeback step by step.

"Let's go in stages — first the national team," said Maradona, who on Saturday equals the record 21 World Cup finals appearances in Argentina's Group D clash with Nigeria.

Three months ago I couldn't even get a contract with the local district team," the Argentine captain joked.

Alegre's number two, Boca vice-president Carlos Heller, who was at Argentina's practice at their World Cup base near Boston, denied the club had made any approach to Maradona for him to play for them after the tournament.

"Now is not the time," Heller said.

Maradona has had little club football in the last year, since his sacking by Spain's Sevilla last June. He had a brief spell at Newell's Old Boys in Argentina but was sacked by the Rosario club in February.

He still has to reply to an offer from Bolivian league runners-up Bolivar to play six South American Libertadores Cup Club Championship matches for one million US dollars.

Maradona said Argentina's clash with Nigeria is a key match. "They have a good team. If we win we'll ratify what we did against Greece."

All the better for Nigeria's adrenalin

DALLAS, June 25: Nigeria got a second boost from the World Cup finals on Friday when FIFA announced the African nation would host next year's World Youth Cup, reports Reuter.

FIFA general secretary Sepp Blatter said Nigeria had provided government guarantees on telecommunications, hotels, stadiums and security during talks in Dallas this week.

World soccer's governing body provisionally decided last year to award the finals, scheduled to open on March 11, to Nigeria pending satisfactory guarantees.

Nigeria, winners of the last World Youth Cup and African Champions at senior level, won their opening match at the World Cup finals 3-0 against Bulgaria on Tuesday.

Nigeria's tournament organiser chief Sebastian Babatunde Williams said the competition would be staged in Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu.

Haiti under WC spell

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, June 25: Caretaker Prime Minister Robert Malval said Friday that Haiti was paralysed by World Cup soccer mania and few, if any, changes were likely before the tournament ends July 18, reports Reuter.

"This country is demobilised by the World Cup," Malval said. "I think when we wake up on July 18, that's the end of the World Cup party, that will be the beginning of the end of the party here."

Hundreds of people, many of them worried the United States might invade, jammed the capital's airport to get on the last flights out of Haiti Friday before a ban on air traffic with the United States takes effect at midnight.

The ban is aimed at pressuring Haiti's military leaders to cede power and allow exiled president Jean-Bertrand Aristide to return.

WORLD CUP DIARY

LOS ANGELES, June 25: Friday's World Cup diary:

ON THE BANDWAGON

US football officials, used to labouring in obscurity, are a bit nonplussed by the attention heaped on the team after their historic 2-1 victory over Colombia.

Assistant coach Steve Sampson said he had been hearing football news on at least one radio station that never covered the game before.

"It was a station that never, ever talks about soccer," he said. "They played the highlights of the game and then God bless America, give me a break."

Security officials at the 1990 World Cup were prepared for the worst in football hooliganisms, but there has been little trouble so far.

At the first two matches in Detroit's Silverdome, with a combined attendance of 1,34, 853, there has been just one arrest.

"It has been like a pyjama party," said one Silverdome official.

Packing them in

Total attendance for the first 17 matches of the World Cup was 1,134, 645, according to official figures released by organisers.

The biggest crowd so far was the 93,194 who saw the United States beat Colombia 2-1 in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, site of the July 17 final.

Nigerian's German move blocked

Emmanuel Amunike's 800,000-dollar move to German club Duisburg has been blocked by his Egyptian club Zamalek who are expecting better offers after the Nigerian's goalscoring start to their World Cup campaign in the 3-0 win over Bulgaria.

Amunike helped Zamalek win the African Champions' Cup last December and club official Abdel Aziz Qabil said: "We have decided to wait until after the World Cup because there are bound to be better offers from European clubs."

Cup fans chill out

Fans and players are beating the heat at sweltering World Cup venues with the help of "cool zones," shower-like devices that spray a refreshing mist.

As many as 90 spectators can crowd under one of the devices, which look like big shower stalls and spray a fine, chilled mist.

The misters have also been installed behind the team benches at eight of the nine World Cup venues, and outside for fans at New York, Dallas, Orlando and Los Angeles.

The company that makes the misters said they were originally developed to keep farm animals cool.

Master of all he surveys

FIFA officials are defending Scottish referee Leslie Mottram's decision to add on so much injury time at the end of South Korea and Bolivia's scoreless Group C match.

FIFA secretary general Sepp Blatter said Mottram's decision was unusual, but he had done nothing wrong.

"The referee is master on the field and the master of time," said Blatter.

Mottram, a 43-year-old school teacher, has been named to referee the Nigeria v Greece Group D match next week in Boston.

GOAL TOTAL UP

After 17 World Cup matches 41 goals had been scored, more than in the same number of matches in Italy four years ago. Strikers account for 24 of them and midfielders have scored 14 goals. In a break down of when goals have been scored FIFA report most of the scoring has come just before half-time and just after. FIFA's figures reveal that attacks down the right are having most success with 11 goals. Attacks down the left have only produced five goals.

US hype delights FIFA

FIFA officials are delighted with America's stunning win over Colombia. "We are on the front pages in the American press," said FIFA general secretary Sepp Blatter on Friday. US organisers report that after 17 games, over 95 per cent of the stadiums were full. ABC say some 18 million people watched the US-Colombia match, more than watched the US Open golf championship.

New role for Garcia, new life for Mexico